



THE SECRETARY OF EDUCATION
WASHINGTON, DC 20202

September 13, 2022

Dear Colleague,

The last two years have had a profound impact on our students and schools. National data released earlier this month from the [National Assessment of Educational Progress](#) confirm this impact and should call on us all to redouble our efforts to help our students recover.

This Administration knew that a historic disruption to schooling and to our society would likely result in significant, negative impacts on students' learning. This is why the Biden-Harris Administration called on schools to reopen and provided historic levels of support to safely enable this goal from day one. Today, with the help of American Rescue Plan (ARP) funds, nearly all schools are open for in-person learning versus the 46 percent of schools that were open when the President was inaugurated. Funds from the ARP should continue to be spent urgently to meet the immediate needs of students and provide the necessary academic and mental health supports.

As States begin to release student assessment data from the 2021–22 school year, the Department of Education (Department) expects academic performance will reflect these impacts—as well as the inequities in educational opportunity that preceded it—across communities, grade spans, and student groups. The Department remains especially concerned about disproportionate impacts for students from low-income backgrounds, students of color, students with disabilities, multilingual learners, students experiencing homelessness, and migratory students.

I want to be clear that State assessment results, and results from other assessments of student learning, should serve as a further call to action to accelerate investments in high-quality instruction and other evidence-based strategies (such as acceleration, tutoring, and summer and afterschool programs) that support academic recovery, student mental health, and other needs; to further focus these resources on students who have experienced the most disruption in their education and have the fewest opportunities for success; and to better support teachers and school leaders, including by bringing more qualified and caring adults into the education profession.

The purpose of this letter is to remind all who report and interpret student outcomes this year that assessment data has always been meant to be used constructively—to help inform parents and families about their students' schools and to ensure schools receive the necessary resources to help support students. Further, this letter is intended to support our communities in countering efforts to misuse these results by applying them punitively.

We know that some education stakeholders would have preferred the Department to waive assessment requirements over the past two years, but it was not the time to do so, just as now is not the time to lower standards for students. Used in the right way, data from high-quality

systems of assessment can inform instruction and help school leaders drive resources to the schools and students that need them the most. Furthermore, parents want to know how their children are doing in school and what is needed to move them forward. Even when identifying schools for support and improvement, as required by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act's (ESEA) accountability and school improvement requirements, the goal is not to penalize, but rather to make sure these schools receive the additional ARP and other funding and assistance they need to improve.

In this context, I want to share some considerations around possible interpretation, use, and communication of school year 2021–22 assessment data:

- We know that State and local context matters in the interpretation of achievement results. For a handful of States, and a substantial number of local educational agencies (LEAs), school year 2021–22 results reflect the first large-scale administration of federally required assessments since 2019. Other States had reasonably high and representative assessment participation in both the 2020–21 and 2021–22 school years, allowing for more definitive evaluation of school and student progress since our collective efforts to reopen schools began.
- Given this, and [consistent with our previous guidance](#), we continue to urge States to take additional steps to reduce the high stakes of assessments in such State decisions as graduation or promotion requirements or in educator evaluations. Please do not confuse this with a recommendation to lower standards; rather, standards for students should remain high as this will lead to stronger outcomes in the long run.
- We encourage states to emphasize the original intended uses of statewide annual assessments: to provide comparable data to identify outcome gaps; to provide educators, parents, and families with data to inform education planning and decision making; to help evaluate academic programs across districts and schools; and to prioritize additional funds, resources, and supports to the schools, educators, and students who need them most.
- We continue to emphasize that statewide annual State assessment results are one of several important measures of school performance and progress. Additional measures required by ESEA include high school graduation rates, English language proficiency, another academic indicator, and an indicator of school quality and student success. Multiple measures provide a more complete perspective on resources, supports, and student success—and help to more effectively identify appropriate strategies and interventions. Some states are using academic growth, extended-year high school graduation rates, regular school attendance and reductions in chronic absenteeism, indicators of college and career readiness, and indicators of a positive and inclusive school climate.

- In addition, there are some promising State practices to implement other valid and reliable measures of school progress, including opportunity to learn data. Examples of opportunity to learn indicators are included in [ED COVID-19 Handbook, Volume 2: Roadmap to Reopening Safely and Meeting All Students' Needs](#).

This year, in particular, it is vital that States publicly report clear, timely, and concise information in an accessible format to help educators, parents, and families chart progress towards academic recovery. I appreciate the complexities of this work and offer the Department's support in communicating and making effective use of these data. For example, the Department's [Regional Education Labs](#) and [Comprehensive Center Network](#) are excellent forums for engaging with other State leaders and measurement experts around data communication, visualization, and interpretation.

It is time for State and district leaders to answer this call to action and meet the scale of our current challenge with solutions that will help our students reach their highest potential. Through ARP, the Department has provided critical resources for success. With bold actions like the launch of the National Partnership for Student Success and the Engage Every Student Initiative, we are here to partner with you and hope to elevate and bolster efforts to raise the bar in education.

As States release achievement and other data, the Department will celebrate initial successes in learning recovery and acceleration; applaud the heroic work led by America's educators, who make them possible; and underscore the need for additional investments, supports, and evidence-based interventions to meet the needs of our school communities—especially our most underserved students.

Sincerely,

/s/

Miguel A. Cardona, Ed.D.
U.S. Secretary of Education